NEW YORK POST
10 December 1985

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 33

The case of the spy for Israel

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JUDGING from several pieces in the press and from many comments I have heard in private, the arrest of an American Jew, Jonathan Jay Pollard, on charges of selling American military secrets to Israel has revived the old Jewish anxiety over the issue of "dual loyalty."

Once upon a time, before the state of Israel existed, this anxiety was so deep that all by itself it led a number of prominent American Jews into an anti-Zionist position. What they feared was not that they themselves would be torn in their loyalties if a Jewish state were to be established. They knew how ardent was their devotion to America. What bothered them was that others might entertain doubts about the reliability of Jewish loyalty to the United States and that this would retard the full acceptance of Jews into American society.

After the actual establishment of the state of Israel, however, it turned out that this fear was, if not altogether groundless, then at least exaggerated. In a period when the old ideal of the melting pot, with its animus against "hyphenated Americans," has been superseded by a new appreciation of ethnic pluralism, most Americans have taken it for granted that Jews do and should feel a special kinship with a Jewish state. Nor have the great majority of Americans — 75 percent according to the most recent surveys — questioned the loyalty of their Jewish compatriots to America on the account.

Still, that leaves a not insubstantial minority of 25 percent of the population who think or suspect that American Jews are more loyal to Israel than to the United States. Who are these people?

Some (and I can produce the hate mail I have received to prove it) are outright anti-Semites who use the club of dual loyalty as just another weapon with which to attack Jews. Others are people so persuaded that U.S. support for Israel is contrary to our national interest that in their eyes Jews, by overwhelmingly favoring this policy, are by definition disloyal to America. A third group, finally, misinterprets the American Jewish commitment to Israel as primarily political in nature.

The first two groups are beyond the reach of argument. But the misunderstanding of the third group can perhaps be cleared up by a little historical background.

One of the aims of the founders of the state of Israel was to "normalize" the Jewish people by giving them a national homeland. Some early Zionist theorists even believed that once a Jewish state came into being, all Jews who wished to remain Jewish would go there to live, and the rest would gradually disappear by assimilation into the surrounding environment.

But things did not work out that way. Instead of choosing either to live in Israel or to assimilate, American Jews have with few exceptions chosen to stay in the United States and also to remain Jewish. The complication is that remaining Jewish has more than anything else come to mean caring about the security and the survival of Israel. As the sociologist Nathan Glazer puts it, Israel is the religion of American Jews.

It is not because Israel is a state, a political entity, that it has come to occupy so central a role. Rather it is because Israel is a Jewish community whose right to exist has from the very beginning been denied by its neighbors who have, moreover, backed up this denial with periodic military assaults. For the second time in the 20th century, then, and state or no state, Jews are being threatened with extinction as Jews and only because they are Jews.

The first time around American Jews did less than they now think they might have done to defend against that threat, which partly explains why defending against it now, the second time around, has become even for otherwise entirely secular Jews an imperative with the force of a religious commandment. Emil Fackenheim, perhaps the leading Jewish theologian of our age, calls it the commandment that issued from Auschwitz: "Thou shalt give no posthumous victories to Hitler."

Among the other blessings Jews are conscious of enjoying in America is the fact that they have been able to obey this commandment — the commandment to resist any further assaults on the collective existence of the Jewish people — wholeheartedly as Jews and with a good and clear conscience as Americans. For like most Americans in general, American Jews firmly believe that the interests of Israel and the interests of the United States are fundamentally harmonious and mutally reinforcing.

This does not, of course, preclude disagreements on particular lines of policy. But serious as such disagreements have occasionally been, they have never been serious enough to create conflicts of loyalty. Nor is it easy to foresee conditions under which they would.

As for the Pollard case, far from provoking such a conflict, it has made even some of Israel's most ardent Jewish supporters here furious at Israel for, precisely, reawakening the suspicion that American Jews are indeed more loyal to Israel than to the United States.

Whatever may be true of Jonathan Jay Pollard, there cannot be many other American Jews who fail to understand that gratuitously jeopardizing American support for Israel is a way of violating, not of obeying, the commandment of Auschwitz.

In other words, if Pollard is guilty of the charges that have been made against him, he is not only guilty of treason as an American, he is also guilty of sinning against the Jewish people. And the Israeli authorities who employed him are guilty of the same sin as well.

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